

IMMINENCE IN THE NT, ESPECIALLY PAUL'S THESSALONIAN EPISTLES

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Fathers in the ancient church dealt frequently with the doctrine of imminence, sometimes viewing God's future wrath against rebels as imminent and sometimes viewing the future coming of Christ as imminent. The NT furnishes good reason for the fathers to view both aspects of the future as imminent, beginning with the teachings of Christ who laid the foundation for the teaching of imminency though His use of parabolic expressions of a master standing at the door and knocking and of an unexpected coming of a thief and His use of the futuristic tense of ἔρχομαι (erchomai). In company with other NT writers, Paul emphasized the imminence of both future wrath and the return of Christ in His two epistles to the Thessalonians. He did this in several parts of the epistles—in discussing the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5, in describing the "catching away" in 1 Thessalonians 4, in 1 Thess 1:9-10 and 2:16, and in 2 Thess 1:9-10 and 2:1-3. A study of the two epistles and a survey the rest of the NT indicates that the church fathers were right: the rapture of the church and the beginning of the day of the Lord could come at any moment.

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The testimony of the ancient fathers is mixed, sometimes speaking of the imminence of Christ's return and other times of the imminence of the future time of wrath. Clement speaks of the former as imminent:

Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, "Speedily will He come, and will not tarry;" and, "The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look."¹

Ignatius speaks of the latter as imminent:

¹The First Epistle of Clement 23.

The last times are come upon us. Let us therefore be of a reverent spirit, and fear the long-suffering of God, that it tend not to our condemnation. For let us either stand in awe of the wrath to come, or show regard for the grace which is at present displayed—one of two things.²

Irenaeus speaks of both as imminent:

And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, "There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be."³

Why this apparent ambivalence among early Christian leaders who were following the teachings of the same NT as present-day Bible students? The following discussion proposes that there is good reason for their teachings that both the return of Christ for His church and the return of Christ to inflict wrath and tribulation on the world are imminent.

An earlier article on the book of Revelation substantiates this dual imminence.⁴ The present essay will focus attention on Paul's two epistles to the Thessalonian church, but it first must probe the question of who originated the NT teaching on imminence. Imminence of these two future happenings interweaves itself into NT teaching from beginning to end, raising the strong probability that the origin of the teaching was none other than Jesus Himself. Thus the first area to explore briefly will be some of Jesus' teachings on the subject. Then the study can concentrate its attention on Paul's Thessalonian epistles.

Jesus' Emphasis on Imminence

The Olivet Discourse and Earlier

In Luke 12:35-48, as part of His Later Judean Ministry just over three months before delivering His Olivet Discourse, Jesus instructed His disciples about the need of being ready for His return:

Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning. And be like men awaiting their master when he departs from the wedding feast, that when he comes and knocks, they may immediately open for him. . . . And know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. And you too, be prepared, because at the hour when you do not expect, the Son of Man is coming. . . . Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom the lord will appoint over his service, for a measuring of rations in season. Blessed is that slave whom, when

²Ignatius *Ephesians* 11, shorter version.

³Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.29.1.

⁴Robert L. Thomas, "The 'Comings' of Christ in Revelation 2-3," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 7/2 (Fall 1996):153-81.

he comes, his master will find doing thus. I say truly to you that he will appoint him over all his possessions. But if that slave says in his heart, "My Lord delays to come, and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the Lord of that slave will come in a day when he does not expect and in an hour which he does not know and cut him in pieces and assign him a place with unbelievers. . . ."⁵

These two parables contain two pictorial expressions that became a vital part of Christian thinking throughout the first-century church.⁶ The first is that of the master standing at the door and knocking (Luke 12:36), and the second is that of the unexpected coming of a thief (Luke 12:39). The design of both figures is to teach the imminence of Christ's return. In both parables of Luke 12:35-48, the unexpected coming brings blessing to the followers who are prepared, but in the latter parable that coming brings punishment to those who are unprepared.

Jesus also laid groundwork for His Olivet Discourse less than three months before that sermon when He used the coming of the flood in Noah's day and the destruction of Sodom in Lot's day as examples of His imminent return (Luke 17:22-37). This lesson came during the period of His ministry in and around Perea.

Then on Tuesday of His last week on earth, Jesus taught similar lessons regarding His return. The signs given in Matt 24:4-28 are within Daniel's seventieth week and indicate the nearness of Jesus' return to earth as described in Matt 24:29-31.⁷ These signals of nearness differ from the parables of Luke 12:35-48, which contained no signs of nearness. If signs must occur before His coming, His coming is not imminent. Neither are there signs given in Luke 17:26-37, where Jesus with several similar comparisons predicts the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God.

But in Matt 24:36 Jesus turns the page to speak of the absence of any sign that might signal the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week.⁸ His words were, "But

⁵Translations in this essay are those of the author.

⁶Marshall notes the recurrence of the picture of the master standing outside the door and knocking in Rev 3:20, and the recurrence of the metaphor of the thief in 1 Thess 5:2, 4; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15 (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978] 536, 538; with regard to the thief metaphor, cf. also Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed., Moisés Silva. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996] 1171, and Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 of NAC [Nashville: Broadman, 1992] 360).

⁷Davies and Allison correctly see "all these things" in vv. 33 and 34 as embracing "all the signs and events leading up to the parousia" (W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3, ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997] 366, cf. also 367). Hagner agrees that the expression covers "everything spoken of in vv. 4-28" (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 33B of Word Biblical Commentary, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker [Dallas: Word, 1995] 715). Cf. also D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *EBCT*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8:507.

⁸Davies and Allison take 24:36 as the heading for the section on "eschatological vigilance" (24:36-25:30) rather than linking it with material that has gone before in the Discourse, and see the entire section as teaching that "one must be ever prepared for what may come at any time" (*Gospel according to Saint Matthew* 374, cf. also 374 n. 1). The *δέ* (*de*) that begins v. 36 must be transitional, because the

concerning that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father only.” His use of “day and hour” encompass a broader span than just a 24-hour day or a 60-minute hour.⁹ As is true throughout Matthew (cf. Matt 7:22; 10:19; 24:42, 44, 50; 25:13; 26:45), the two time-designations cover a broad period of time. Jesus is saying that no one has the faintest idea about when—in the broadest sense of the term “when”—the Son of Man will return. Here He indicates the complete unexpectedness of what will overtake the world at the time of His second advent.¹⁰ He changes the subject from the signs that indicate the nearness of His coming to establish the kingdom in 24:32-35 to speak of events which will have no signals to indicate that the advent is “at the door.”¹¹ In other words, 24:36 speaks of a different arrival from the arrival signaled by “all these things,” twice referred to in connection with the parable of the fig tree in 24:32-34.¹² After 24:36 Jesus looks at the events of Daniel’s seventieth week as a whole and how the beginning of that week will catch everyone by surprise, with no indication that it is “at the door.”¹³

thirty-sixth verse changes from the discussion of signs preceding the coming to emphasize that no signs will precede the *parousia*. Περὶ δὲ (*Peri de*, 24:36) is a frequent NT device for introducing a change from one phase of a subject to another phase of the same subject or from one subject to another subject (cf. Matt 22:31; Mark 12:26; 13:32; Acts 21:25; 1 Cor 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12; 1 Thess 4:9, 13; 5:1). The verse introduces an aspect of the coming different from the one pointed to in Matt 24:29-31. The verb depicting the coming in 24:30 is *erchomenon*, but the noun designating the “coming” in 24:37 is *parousia*, a term that easily covers a wider span.

⁹Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 22:365.

¹⁰Hagner correctly understands “that day and hour” to mean that setting a time for the *parousia* is “beyond human determination altogether, and not just partially, e.g., so that, say, the month or year could be known . . .” (*Matthew 14–28* 716).

¹¹Davies and Allison illustrate the unity of the section begun at v. 36 by citing the repetition of key phrases (e.g., “you do not know” [24:42], “you do not expect” [24:44], “he does not know” [24:50], “you know neither the day nor the hour” [25:13]) and key words (e.g., “know,” “day[s],” “hour,” “come[s],” “Son of man,” “watch”) that are repeated throughout (Davies and Allison, *Gospel according to Saint Matthew* 377).

¹²As A. B. Bruce puts it, “[I]t looks like Jesus correcting Himself . . .” in v. 36 (“The Gospels According to Matthew, Mark and Luke,” *EGT*, W. Robertson Nicoll [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.] 1:296).

¹³Davies and Allison understand “that day” in 24:36 to refer to the OT day of the Lord, spoken of in the NT as the *parousia*, and, because of a difference in perspective, explain the timing uncertainty of v. 36 not as contradicting the certainty of v. 34 but as interpreting it (Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 378; cf. also Blomberg, *Matthew* 22:365, who cites Matt 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36 in support of this being a reference to the day of the Lord). They understand “this generation” of v. 34 to refer to Jesus’ contemporaries rather than seeing it as a qualitative expression as this writer takes it to be (cf. Robert L. Thomas, “The Place of Imminence in Recent Eschatological Systems,” in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001] 201-4). For further delineation of the qualitative view of “this generation,” see Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand

Jesus illustrated the complete unexpectedness of the series of events of that week by noting the parallel of His coming to inflict wrath on the world with the way God caught the world by surprise with the flood in Noah's day (24:37-39). The victims did not know about it until the flood happened. That will be the case when the Son of Man returns. The world will not know until the period is under way. They will have no warnings such as those alluded to in the parable of the fig tree.

He continued His emphasis on the imminence of that return by describing two workers in the field and two female grinders at the mill (24:40-41). In each case, one will be taken in judgment as were those outside of Noah's family, and the other will be left as were the members of Noah's family. The picture is that of complete surprise. No one in Noah's day had the faintest idea that a series of cataclysms was about to begin. On that basis, Jesus commanded the disciples to watch, because neither they nor anyone else knew at what period of history their Lord would come to inflict judgment on disobedient Israel (24:42).

At that point Jesus gave the men five parables to enforce His teaching of imminence. The first is in the Gospel of Mark and the last four in the Gospel of Matthew. The Markan parable tells of a man who left home for a journey and gave his slaves tasks to accomplish while he was gone. He gave special instructions to the doorkeeper—note the implication that the master would return to the door—to remain on the alert, because they had no idea when the master of the house would return (Mark 13:33-37). This parable contains nothing to indicate the master would return within a given time-span as the parable of the fig tree would require, so the slaves were to remain on the alert into the indefinite future.

Matthew's first parable, the second in this series by the Lord, tells of the master of a house who did not know during what watch of the night the thief would come (Matt 24:43-44). Though not stated explicitly, it is implicit that the master did not know on what given night the thief would come or whether he would come at all. As a result, the thief broke into his house because he was not watching. In light of that comparison, the Lord tells His disciples to be prepared because the Son of Man will come at an hour they do not expect. This marks the Lord's second use of the figure of the unexpected coming of a thief. The parable places no limit on the time frame during which the thief had to come, and so again the pattern of the parable of the fig tree is not applicable.

Matthew's second parable in this series describes the faithful and wise slave and the wicked slave (24:45-51). Their master will richly reward the slave whom he finds fulfilling his responsibilities when he returns, but will punish severely that wicked slave who uses the delay in his master's return to abuse the authority given to him. "The master of that slave will come on a day when he [the slave] does not expect and at an hour that he does not know" (24:50). That slave can anticipate an eternity of weeping and gnashing of teeth. The parable fixes no maximum amount of time for the master's absence as would be implied if this were speaking of the

same coming as the parable of the fig tree.

The fourth parable in the series, the third in Matthew's Gospel, speaks of ten virgins, five of whom were foolish and five wise (25:1-13). When the bridegroom came unexpectedly in the middle of the night, the foolish virgins had no oil for their lamps. By the time they purchased oil, it was too late, and they found themselves locked out of the wedding feast where the wise virgins had been admitted. Neither group knew a fixed period within which the groom would return, but one group was ready, the other was not. The lesson: "Watch therefore, because you do not know the day or the hour" (25:13).

The fifth and last parable in the series comes in Matt 25:14-30, the parable of the talents. Prior to leaving on a journey, the master gave one slave five talents, another two talents, and a third slave one talent. The one with five talents gained five more, and the one with two gained two more. Upon the master's return, they received his commendation with a promise of being given more responsibility. The slave with one talent buried his talent and received the master's rebuke for not investing it to gain more. That slave's destiny was outer darkness. The lesson of this parable is that of serving the Lord responsibly while awaiting His return. Readiness for His return also entails responsible action while He is away, not for a limited time, but for a time of unstipulated length.

In the two illustrations of Noah's day and the sowers and grinders and in the first four parables, the incontrovertible lesson Jesus teaches is that of the imminence of His return to judge, and therefore, the need for watchfulness and readiness for that return whenever it should occur. It is no wonder that the early church and the church throughout the ages has considered events surrounding the Lord's return as imminent. He will return to begin the series of events that will mark Daniel's seventieth week, with no prior signals to herald His return. Since nothing remains to occur before His *parousia*, that *parousia* is imminent.

Chart 1 on page 197 summarizes the above discussion.

The Upper Room Discourse

On the Mount of Olives, the dominant theme on Tuesday of Passion Week was Jesus' return to judge the nation Israel, as He spoke to the disciples. On Thursday of that week His Discourse in the Upper Room spoke to them in an entirely different role. On Tuesday they represented national Israel. On Thursday, however, He addressed them as representatives of a new body to be formed about fifty days later, that body being the church. Here He injected His imminent return in a more subtle fashion, but He nevertheless made the point. In John 14:3 He said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, you may be also." Imminence is part of the verb form "I will come," the Greek word *ἔρχομαι* (*erchomai*). Used in 14:3 in parallel with the future indicative *παραλήμψομαι* (*paralēmpsomai*), which means "I will receive," the present tense *erchomai* is clearly a futuristic use of the present tense, a use of

Chart 1—Imminence Versus Nonimminence

<p style="text-align: center;">Nonimminent</p> <p>Coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of the sky (Mt 24:29-31; Mk 13:24-27; Lk 21:25-27) [a single judgment]</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Imminent</p> <p>Parousia of the Son of Man to impose wrath (Mt 24:37, 44) [beginning of a series of judgments]</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Signs of Nearness: “These things” and “all these things” (Mt 24:33-34; Mk 13:29-30; Lk 21:31-32)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Signs of Nearness: “No one knows about that day and hour” (Mt 24:36, 42; 25:13; Mk 13:32)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">“Beginning of Sorrows” Signs (Mt 24:4-14; Mk 13:5-13; Lk 21:8-19)</p> <p>Many coming in Christ’s name (Mt 24:5; Mk 13:6; Lk 21:8)</p> <p>Wars and rumors of wars (Mt 24:6; Mk 13:7; Lk 21:9)</p> <p>Nation against nation (Mt 24:7a; Mk 13:8a; Lk 21:10)</p> <p>Famines and earthquakes (Mt 24:7b; Mk 13:8b; Lk 21:11a)</p> <p>Persecution and martyrdom (Mt 24:9; Mk 13:9; Lk 21:12)</p> <p>Apostasy and dissension (Mt 24:10; Mk 13:12; Lk 21:16)</p> <p>False prophets (Mt 24:11)</p> <p>Increase of lawlessness (24:12)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Great Tribulation” Signs (Mt 24:15-28; Mk 13:14-23)</p> <p>Abomination of desolation (Mt 24:15; Mk 13:14)</p> <p>Flight to the mountains (Mt 24:16-18; Mk 13:14b-16)</p> <p>Great tribulation (Mt 24:21; Mk 13:19)</p> <p>False christs and false prophets (Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">[No signs]</p>

that tense that strongly implies imminence.¹⁴ The sense is, “I am on my way and may arrive at any moment.”

This is a coming for deliverance of the faithful, however, not a coming for judgment. He will retrieve the faithful and take them back to the Father’s house with Himself (John 14:2-3).¹⁵ There they will remain with Him until He returns to the earth to establish His earthly kingdom for a thousand years.

The conclusion must be therefore that Jesus was the one who initiated the teaching of the imminence of His return both to judge the world and to deliver the faithful. As we proceed, we will see how that teaching caught on with the first-century NT church. Subsequent books of the NT indicate that two figures used by Him to portray that imminence caught the attention and remained in the memories of early Christians. One figure was the surprise arrival of a thief and the other was the picture of a master standing at the door ready to enter at any moment.

Summary of Jesus’ Teaching on Imminence

Jesus’ emphasis on imminence carries at least four connotations for living individuals of each generation:

- People cannot reckon that a certain amount of time will pass before a predicted event will occur, and therefore must be prepared at all times for that occurrence.¹⁶
- No other prophecy in the Bible remains to be fulfilled before the imminent event occurs. Therefore, if two prophesied events are imminent, neither can precede the other.
- Setting a date when an imminent event will occur is impossible. Date-setting directly contradicts the concept of imminency because it posits a certain amount of time before the event, thereby nullifying its imminence.¹⁷
- Imminence means that the date of a predicted event may not be limited to a certain period of time, such as approximately forty years between Christ’s crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem or approximately seven years of Daniel’s seventieth week. The time span within which an imminent event will

¹⁴Wayne A. Brindle, “Biblical Evidence for the Imminence of the Rapture,” *BSac* 158 (April-June 2001):139-142.

¹⁵Brown’s words regarding John 14:2-3 are, “These verses are best understood as a reference to a parousia in which Jesus would return soon after his death to lead his disciples triumphantly to heaven” (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John [xiii-xxi]*, vol. 29A of AB [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970] 626). Yet Brown concludes that the verses had to be reinterpreted when the early church realized that the *parousia* had not occurred soon after the death of Jesus and when the disciples began to die.

¹⁶Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001) 201.

¹⁷Ibid.

occur is completely undefined and unlimited.

Chart 2 on page 200 summarizes Jesus' emphasis on His imminent coming both to judge the unrepentant and to deliver the faithful.

Emphasis on Imminence by NT Writers Other Than Paul

Other NT writers show the effect of Jesus' teachings on imminence. In the late forties of the first century A.D., James in his epistle wrote to Jewish believers in the Diaspora (i.e., the dispersion) about dual imminence. The imminence of coming judgment on oppressors of the poor (James 5:1-6) and the imminence of Christ's coming as an incentive for longsuffering of the faithful (James 5:7-11). He has Christ standing at the door, ready to enter and rectify past injustices (5:9). That was one of the figures introduced by Jesus in Luke 12:36 and in His Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:34).

In the late sixties Peter wrote to believers in what is now north-central Asia Minor about the imminent arrival of the day of the Lord (2 Pet 3:10). Using a later part of that day to represent the day as a whole, he spoke of the day's coming as a thief, both to encourage mockers to repent and to help the faithful to persevere. That was the second figure used by Jesus in Luke 12:39 and on the Mount of Olives (Matt 24:43).

In the last decade of the first century, John wrote to seven churches in first-century Asia to persuade the unrepentant to repent and the faithful to hold fast (Revelation 2-3).¹⁸ One of the figures he used to exhort the churches to watchfulness in light of Christ's coming was that of a thief (Rev. 3:3; 16:15; cf. Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39). Another was the figure of His standing at the door and knocking (Rev 3:20; cf. Mark 13:34; Luke 12:36). See Chart 3 on page 201 for a chronological summary of these passages on imminence.

¹⁸See Thomas, "'Comings' of Christ" 153-81, for a fuller discussion of dual imminence in that portion of John's writings.

Chart 2—An Imminent Coming with Two Purposes

<u>Coming</u>	Direct Statement: No one knows when	Mt 24:36	Mt 24:44	Mt 25:13		
	Parable: Master at the Door	Lk 12:36	Mk 13:34			
	Parable: House-breaking Thief	Lk 12:39	Mt 24:43			
<u>for</u>	Other Parables	Household Slave: Lk 12:42-48	Faithful vs. Wicked Slave: Mt 24:45-51	Ten Virgins: Mt 25:1-13	Talents: Mt 25:14-30	
	Days of Noah	Lk 17:26-27	Mt 24:38-39			
	Days of Lot	Lk 17:28-29				
	<u>Judgment</u>	Example: Two Men in One Bed	Lk 17:34			
		Example: Two Women Grinding	Lk 17:35	Mt 24:41		
		Example: Two Men in the Field	Mt 24:40			
	<u>Coming for Deliverance</u>	Direct Statement: Futuristic Present Tense of <i>erchomai</i> , "I will come," Jn 14:2-3				

Chart 3—NT Teachers of Imminence

	Coming Wrath	Coming Deliverance
Jesus, A.D. 29-30	As a Thief, The Master at the Door: Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 12	Jn 14:2-3
James, late A.D. 40s	Jas 5:1-6	The Judge at the Door: Jas 5:7-11
Paul, A.D. 51	As a Thief: 1 Thess 5:1-11; also 2 Thess 1:7-9	1 Thess 1:10; 4:13-18; 2 Thess 1:10; 2:1-3
Peter, A.D. 67	As a Thief: 2 Pet 3:10	2 Pet 3:3-9, 11-15
John, A.D. 95	As a Thief: Rev 3:3; 16:15; also Rev 2:5, 16	The Judge at the Door: Rev. 3:20; also Rev 2:25; 3:11

The task of this present essay is to examine the writings of a fourth NT writer, Paul, and to see what he taught about the imminence of Christ's return and the day of the Lord, especially in his Thessalonian epistles.

Paul's Emphasis on Imminence in 1 Thessalonians

The Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5

Paul very clearly teaches the imminence of the wrathful phase of the day of the Lord in 1 Thess 5:2-3: "For you yourselves (i.e., the Thessalonian readers) know with exactness that the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. When they say, 'Peace and safety,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as birth pains to a woman with child, and they shall in no way escape." The apostle offers further evidence of the widespread impact of Jesus' use of the thief figure to express imminence. He reflects the negative impact of the day of the Lord in speaking of the destruction that will beset earth's inhabitants when it arrives. By comparing the period to the birth pains of a pregnant woman, he shows his awareness that the OT and Jesus Himself used that comparison to depict the period just before Jesus' personal reappearance on earth (Isa 13:8; 26:17-19; 66:7ff.; Jer 30:7-8; Micah 4:9-10; Matt 24:8).

Later in the same paragraph, in discussing the exemption of believers from the horrors of this period, Paul gives indication that the day is a period of wrath: "Because God has not appointed us to wrath, but to the possession of salvation

through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:9).¹⁹ This first phase of the day of the Lord will witness the outpouring of God's wrath against a rebellious world. Believers will be delivered from that period.

Regarding 1 Thess 5:2 Hiebert writes, "As a prophetic period, the Day of the Lord is inaugurated with the rapture of the church as described in 4:13-18, covers the time of the Great Tribulation, and involves His return to earth and the establishment of His messianic reign. In this passage Paul is dealing only with the judgment aspect of that day."²⁰ As for the figure of the coming of a thief, Hiebert continues, "The comparison lies in the suddenness and unexpectedness of both events. The thief comes suddenly and at a time that cannot be predetermined; so the Day of the Lord will come suddenly when people are not expecting it."²¹ Such is the imminence which Jesus described when He taught His disciples that no one knows the day or the hour when God will begin to vent His wrath against the world. The apostle reminds his readers of what they know with exactness: that specific information regarding the date for the beginning of the day of the Lord is unavailable to human beings. No prior signal will occur to alert people to the proximity of the day just as no warning comes before a house-breaking thief enters. Unexpectedness of the event forces people to remain in a constant state of readiness.

The Catching Away in 1 Thessalonians 4

The imminence of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5 is obvious, but what is the nature of expectation related to the coming of the Lord to catch away His saints in 1 Thessalonians 4. The *περὶ δέ* (*peri de*, "now concerning") that begins chapter 5 turns to a new aspect of the same subject discussed at the end of chapter 4.²² The connective phrase marks a shift in thought, but a shift that is not without a connection to the foregoing. First Thessalonians 5:1 speaks of "the times and the seasons." What other times and seasons could these be but the ones pertaining to the catching away of those in Christ about which Paul has just written (cf. Acts 1:7).²³ Obviously, both the previous and the following contexts relate to the *parousia* ("coming") of Christ.

The Thessalonian readers had an accurate awareness of the unexpectedness of the arrival of the day of the Lord (5:1-2), having received prior instruction from the apostle based on the teachings of Jesus, but they were ignorant of and therefore

¹⁹Brindle, "Imminence of the Rapture" 144-46.

²⁰D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 227.

²¹Ibid.

²²Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, vol 32B of AB, eds. William Foxwell Albright, and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 288; Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 177; Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 11:280.

²³Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians* 288-89.

perplexed about what would happen to the dead in Christ at the time of Christ's return. Before beginning his review of the imminence of the day of the Lord in 5:1-11, Paul has already in 4:13-18 clarified for them that the dead in Christ will have an equal and even a prior part in the events surrounding Christ's return. That the catching away of those in Christ is temporally connected with the day of the Lord is the natural understanding of the sequence from 1 Thessalonians 4 to 1 Thessalonians 5, a connection that receives verification in 2 Thess 1:9-10, as will be pointed out below in this essay.

Is that coming for those in Christ imminent also? The answer to that question is yes and is based on several indicators. One is the writer's use of the first person plural in 4:15, 17: "we who live and who remain until the coming of the Lord" are the ones who will be caught away. Paul uses the first person plural, because he was personally looking for the Lord's return during his lifetime. This was not a "pious pretense perpetrated for the good of the church. He sincerely lived and labored in anticipation of the day, but he did not know when it would come."²⁴ He was setting an example of expectancy for the church of all ages.²⁵

Proper Christian anticipation includes the imminent return of Christ. His coming will be sudden and unexpected, an any-moment possibility. This means that no divinely revealed prophecies remain to be fulfilled before that event. Without setting a deadline, Paul hoped that it would transpire in his own life time. Entertaining the possibility of his own death (2 Tim. 4:6-8) and not desiring to contravene Christ's teaching about delay (Matt. 24:48; 25:5; Luke 19:11-27), Paul, along with all primitive Christianity, reckoned on the prospect of remaining alive till Christ returned (Rom. 13:11; 1 Cor. 7:26, 29; 10:11; 15:51-52; 16:22; Phil. 4:5). A personal hope of this type characterized him throughout his days (2 Cor. 5:1-4; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:8; Tit. 2:11-13).²⁶

Had Paul thought that the beginning of the day of the Lord would precede the return of Christ for His church, he could not have expected Christ's return at any moment. He would have known that the imminent beginning of the day of the Lord had not yet occurred, and hence that the catching up of those in Christ was not an any-moment possibility. On the contrary, he knew that both happenings could occur at any moment.

Another indicator of the imminence of Christ's coming for those in Christ lies in the nature of Paul's description in 1 Thess 4:16-17. The dead in Christ will be the main participants in the first act of the Lord's return as they are resurrected before anything else happens. Then living Christians will suddenly be snatched away, presumably taking on their resurrection bodies without experiencing death. Since other evidence points to "the word of the Lord" (1 Thess 4:15) as a special

²⁴Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* 210.

²⁵J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (reprint of 1895 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957) 67.

²⁶Thomas, "1 Thessalonians" 278.

revelation through which Paul learned these new details regarding the event, and since 1 Cor 15:51-53 calls similar information a “mystery,” also language for a special revelation, Paul spoke of the same event about four years later in the Corinthian passage: “Behold, I speak a mystery to you: all of us will not sleep, but we all will be changed, in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on imperishability and this mortal must put on immortality.” That additional detail reveals that the whole process will be a momentary happening, not an extended process. Before anyone knows what is happening, it will be over. That again speaks of imminence because Paul again uses the first person plural in Corinthians. He anticipated the possibility that the parousia would come during his lifetime.²⁷ Something that comes and goes that quickly is surely beyond human ability to pinpoint.

How have various systems with no room for imminence handled this biblical teaching? One approach to explaining this teaching is that of Gundry who defines imminence as follows: “By common consent imminence means that so far as we know no predicted event will *necessarily* precede the coming of Christ.”²⁸ His definition would be correct if he had omitted “so far as we know” and “*necessarily*” from that sentence. The statement would then correctly read, “By common consent imminence means that no predicted event will precede the coming of Christ.” Gundry’s additions render his definition of imminence totally inaccurate. He continues, “The concept [of imminence] incorporates three essential elements: suddenness, unexpectedness or incalculability, and a possibility of occurrence at any moment. . . . Imminence would only raise the possibility of pretribulationism on a sliding scale with mid- and posttribulationism.”²⁹ “Suddenness,” “unexpectedness,” and “incalculability” are accurate as is “a possibility of occurrence at any moment,” but raising “the possibility of pretribulationism on a sliding scale with mid- and posttribulationism” is unfortunately distorted. If Christ’s coming is only a *possibility* before the tribulation, the tribulation could begin before the rapture and the biblical teaching of an imminent coming has disappeared. If only a possibility, a person who does not prepare for Christ’s return has an incentive to be prepared radically reduced or even eliminated. He still has a calculated chance of coming through unscathed after God’s wrath begins. Jesus and the other NT writers offered no such prospect for the unrepentant, however.

Another attempt at explaining away imminence is that of Carson who writes the following regarding imminence, “. . . ‘[T]he imminent return of Christ’ then means Christ may return at any time. But the evangelical writers who use the word

²⁷Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 800.

²⁸Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 29 [emphasis in the original].

²⁹Ibid.

divide on whether 'imminent' in the sense of 'at any time' should be pressed to mean 'at any second' or something looser such as 'at any period' or 'in any generation.'"³⁰ Carson's suggestion of a "looser" meaning of imminence removes the primary force of the word. Trying to understand what he and other representatives of this "not imminent but imminent" group mean by imminence or expectation is extremely difficult. It is almost like trying to adjudicate a "doublespeak" contest. Carson says, "Yet the terms 'imminent' and imminency' retain theological usefulness if they focus attention on the eager expectancy of the Lord's return characteristic of many NT passages, a return that could take place soon, i.e., within a fairly brief period of time, without specifying that the period must be one second or less."³¹ Like Gundry, Carson wavers on the meaning of imminent. If imminence means only that Jesus may return at any period or in any generation, it does not match up with the NT teaching on the subject. Such a looser connotation of the word "imminent" loses contact with what Christ taught and what the rest of the NT writers insisted was the proper Christian outlook.

Erickson approaches imminence in another evasive way: "It is one thing to say we do not know when an event will occur; it is another thing to say that we know of no times when it will not occur. If on a time scale we have points 1 to 1,000, we may know that Christ will not come at points 46 and 79, but not know at just what point He will come. The instructions about watchfulness do not mean that Christ may come at any time."³² Erickson's reasoning is difficult to follow. Christ never designated points at which He would not return. He could have come at points 46 and 79, contrary to Erickson's assertion. He could come at any point between 1 and 1,000. The fact that He has not yet come does not erase the ongoing possibility that He can come at any moment.

Witherington's wording for questioning imminence is different: "In short, one cannot conclude that 1 Thessalonians 4:15 clearly means that Paul thought the Lord would definitely return during his lifetime. Possible imminence had to be conjured with, but certain imminence is not affirmed here."³³ From a practical standpoint, possible imminence is tantamount to certain imminence. How Witherington can distinguish between the two defies explanation. Certain imminence means Christ could come at any moment; possible imminence, unless one offers an alternative of impossible imminence to go with it, also means that Christ could return at any moment. The "impossible-imminence" alternative directly contradicts the possible-imminence teaching and is therefore impossible.

Beker represents an unbiased approach to the text when he clarifies Paul's

³⁰D. A. Carson, "Matthew" 490.

³¹Ibid. Carson's reference to "one second or less" vividly recalls 1 Cor 15:52 where Paul prophesies that Christ's coming will be "in a moment [or flash], in the twinkling of an eye."

³²Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 181.

³³Ben Witherington III, "Transcending Imminence: The Gordian Knot of Pauline Eschatology," *Eschatology in the Bible & Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997) 174.

attitude more accurately than those who cannot fit imminence into their eschatological systems:

Thus delay of the parousia is not a theological concern for Paul. It is not an embarrassment for him; it does not compel him to shift the center of his attention from apocalyptic imminence to a form of "realized eschatology," that is to a conviction of the full presence of the kingdom of God in our present history. It is of the essence of his faith in Christ that adjustments in his expectations can occur without a surrender of these expectations (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:15-51; 2 Cor 5:1-10; Phil. 2:21-24). Indeed, the hope in God's imminent rule through Christ remains the constant in his letters from beginning to end. . . .³⁴

All the "nonimminence" advocates, who must place Christ's coming for those in Christ at the end of Daniel's seventieth week, must speak of the unexpectedness of His advent within a limited period of time, because all would agree that events of the tribulation period will be recognizable. Once that period has begun, His coming has to occur within a specified number of years. If that is their meaning, Christ's warnings to watch for His coming are meaningless until Daniel's seventieth week arrives. The church need not watch as He commanded. And when that prophetic week arrives, imminence will no longer prevail because His coming will not be totally unexpected. It will have specified events to signal at least approximately, if not exactly, how far away it is.

Saying the NT teaching of imminence has become garbled in the systems of pre-wrath rapturism and posttribulationism is not an overstatement. According to different advocates, it may mean at any moment within the last half of the seventieth week, at any moment after the seventieth week, during any period rather than at any moment, at an unexpected moment with some exceptions, possibly at any moment but not certainly at any moment, or as many other meanings as nonimminence advocates may conjure up.

Other Indications of Imminence in 1 Thessalonians

In 1 Thess 1:9-10 Paul speaks of his readers' turning to God from idols for two purposes: to serve the living and true God and to await His Son from heaven. The second purpose strikes a note that he continually sounded through his preaching in the city—the kingship of Christ (Acts 17:7)—and throughout both Thessalonian epistles—the return of Christ (1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:2, 23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8). Primitive Christianity believed that the resurrected and ascended Christ would return to establish His kingdom (cf. 1 Thess 2:12) and that His return was near.³⁵ In 1:10 Paul speaks of Jesus as delivering *us* from the coming wrath when He returns from heaven, thereby including himself and his first-century readers among those to be

³⁴J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 49.

³⁵Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, HNTC (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 83; and Brindle, "Imminence of the Rapture" 142-44.

rescued from that future wrath. In this subtle way he again included himself, modeling the proper Christian outlook in expecting the return of Jesus at any moment.

In 1:10 he also speaks of the wrath as “coming” and uses the present participle ἐρχομένης (*erchomenēs*) to qualify the wrath. Though the kind of action—*aktionsart* or aspect—of articular participles is not necessarily stressed in NT Greek, the frequent use of the present tense of this verb in a futuristic sense to speak of the imminence of end events probably portrays the imminence of the wrath which is already on its way and hence could arrive at any moment.³⁶

Another statement of Paul in 1 Thessalonians that is best explained through imminence is 1 Thess 2:16b: “Now the wrath has come upon them fully.” These words climax a paragraph in which Paul is uncharacteristically condemning his fellow-Jews for their part in the crucifixion of Christ and persecuting the prophets and Paul along with his fellow missionaries. Earlier in v. 16 he speaks of their forbidding the evangelizing of the Gentiles as an aspect of reaching the limit in sinning against God (2:16a).

The wrath for which the Jewish people as well as the rest of the world are destined is the eschatological wrath spoken of in 1 Thess 1:10 and 5:9, a well-known and expected period just before the Messiah inaugurates His Kingdom. This pronouncement of the arrival of the wrath brings Paul's excursus against the Jews to its logical climax.

Surprisingly, however, Paul does not use a future tense, “will come,” to speak of the wrath. He uses a past tense, “has come.” The Greek expression is ἔφθασεν ἐπί (*ephthasen epi*, “has come upon”), the same combination used by Jesus in Matt 12:28 and Luke 11:20 to speak of the arrival of the kingdom. “The kingdom of God has come upon you” were the Lord's words to His listeners. The unique force of the verb and preposition in that situation connoted “arrival upon the threshold of fulfilment and accessible experience, *not* the entrance into that experience.”³⁷ The connotation in 1 Thess 2:16 is the same with regard to the wrath. Just as the kingdom reached the covenant people at Christ's first advent without their enjoying “the experience ensuing upon the initial contact,”³⁸ so the wrath that will precede that kingdom has already come without the Jews' full experience of it. It is at the threshold. All prerequisites for unleashing this future torrent have been met. God has set conditions in readiness through the first coming and the rejection of the Messiah by His people. A time of trouble awaits Israel just as it does the rest of the world, and the breaking forth of this time is portrayed as an “imminent condemnation” by the combination *ephthasen epi*.³⁹ Such a potential presence of the wrath

³⁶James Everett Frame, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912) 89. In this connection, see the present tense *erchetai* in 1 Thess 5:2.

³⁷K. W. Clark, “Realized Eschatology,” *JBL* 59 (September 1940):379.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*, 380.

accords with the epistle's emphasis on an imminent breaking forth of end-time events, one of which is the time of Israel's trouble just before the Messiah's return.⁴⁰

Dual imminence prevails elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians, not just in chapters 4 and 5. Paul allowed no time between Christ's coming to catch away the church to Himself and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth prophetic week, which coincides with the opening phase of the day of the Lord.

The dual-imminence teaching results from exegetical evidence found in a number of NT passages. Various theological objections may be and have been lodged against such a position. Some may question how the signing of the treaty between "the prince who is to come" and Israel to begin Daniel's seventieth week (Dan 9:26-27) can coincide with the rapture of the church. Such a theological question has several possible answers. That prince may arise to power before the rapture of the church, setting the stage for the signing, or the signing of the covenant with Israel may not occur at the very first moment the seventieth week begins. Daniel 9 does not seem to require that precise timing. One could propose various scenarios to answer the theological difficulty that dual imminence allegedly poses. Exegetical evidence must take precedence over theological considerations, however, even though specific answers to theological questions that exegetical decisions raise may not be immediately obvious.⁴¹

⁴⁰Best, *First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* 120-21.

⁴¹Walvoord proposes a period between the rapture of the church and the seventieth week, during which ten nations must unite. He writes, "The ten-nation kingdom must be formed in the final seven years before the Second Coming" (John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1990] 485; cf. *ibid.*, 487). His diagram of the day of the Lord on 485 clarifies what he apparently intends by this statement: the day of the Lord begins simultaneously with the rapture, but includes an undefined period after the rapture and before Daniel's seventieth week during which the forming of the ten-nation kingdom will occur. See also his statement, "The time period [i.e., the day of the Lord] begins at the rapture, but major events do not come immediately. However, if the DOL has progressed very far, there will be unmistakable signs that they are in the DOL" (*ibid.*, 492).

Showers also proposes such an interval between the rapture and the beginning of the seventieth week, during which will occur the regathering of Israel, the emergence of a great world ruler, rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and a covenant of peace with Israel (Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha, Our Lord Come!* [Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel, 1995] 61). But he differs from Walvoord when he sees the day of the Lord and the seventieth week beginning simultaneously (*ibid.*, 63), but he has the rapture occurring at an earlier time because he does not see it as part of the day of the Lord (*ibid.*, 59).

Ryrie's opinion is that the Scriptures are noncommittal regarding the issue of whether or not there is a time gap between the rapture and the seventieth week: "Though I believe that the Rapture precedes the beginning of the Tribulation, actually nothing is said in the Scriptures as to whether or not some time (or how much time) may elapse between the Rapture and the beginning of the Tribulation" (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1986] 465).

In his comments on Rev 3:10, Jeffrey L. Townsend concurs with the position of this essay regarding the imminence of the rapture and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week when he writes, "Both the coming of the hour [of testing] and the coming of the Lord are imminent. . . . There will be preservation outside the imminent hour of testing for the Philadelphian church when the Lord comes" ("The Rapture in Revelation 3:10," *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy [Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995] 377).

Paul's Continuing Support of Imminence in 2 Thessalonians

A major objection to Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians has been the epistle's eschatological perspective that is supposedly different from what 1 Thessalonians teaches. The theory advanced is that 2 Thessalonians upholds a Christian approach to the doctrine of last things that arose after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁴² The principal difference cited is the signs that 2 Thessalonians locates before the arrival of the day of the Lord. That contrasts with the indication in 1 Thessalonians that the day could come at any moment, without any prophesied event(s) to precede it. This proposed difference in teaching offered as a challenge of the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians calls to mind 2 Thess 2:1-3.

Imminence of Our Gathering Together and the Day of the Lord (2:1-3)

Since Paul's first epistle, the persecuted Thessalonian church had been beset with false teaching that the day of the Lord had already begun and the persecutions and afflictions the church was experiencing (1:4) were the initial phase of that day, coinciding with the pains of a "woman with child" spoken of in the first epistle (5:3). They should not have had such an impression if Paul had taught them that Christ's return for those in Christ would be a single event, an event at the beginning of the day of the Lord.

Posttribulationists are at a loss to explain how the first-century readers could have thought themselves to be already in the day of the Lord if that day occurred simultaneously with the coming of Christ for the church. That leaves no time for persecution during the day of the Lord. In the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians (1:5-10), Paul had just spoken of how God would afflict the unrighteous and reward the faithful in the day of the Lord. The readers knew that the opening period of that day would be tribulation to the ungodly and also a day of persecution for the saints, so the false teaching had led them to believe that they were already in that period.

To correct this error, Paul pointed first to "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him" (2:1). "Our gathering together to Him" defines which aspect of Jesus' coming the writer has in mind and reminds readers of the great event described in 1 Thess 4:14-17, the gathering of those in Christ to meet Him in the air en route to be with the Father in heaven. He wanted to emphasize that the day of the Lord cannot begin on earth before the saints are in heaven with the Father. Since Christ's reappearance to take the saints to heaven had not yet occurred, the day of the Lord could not yet have begun. Therefore, the apostle asks them not to be shaken or troubled by the false message they had received (2:2a). The gathering together had not yet occurred; hence the day of the

⁴²Willi Marxen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. G. Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 42; Reginald H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1966) 57; Norman Perrin, *The New Testament, An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) 120.

Lord had not yet begun.

Paul even specifies what the false teaching consists of. It was proposing that “the day of the Lord is present” (2:2b). The rendering of the verb ἐνέστηκεν (*enesitēken*) in 2:2b as “is present” rather than as “has come” or “will come” is very important, because that is the key to interpreting the difficult verse immediately following. English versions have, for the most part, consistently mistranslated this verb. Those with erroneous renderings include the KJV, the RSV, the NASB, the NASBU, the ESV, the NIV, the ASV, the ICB, and the NKJV. Only three versions consulted render the verb correctly. Darby renders, “the day of the Lord is present,” Weymouth has, “the day of the Lord is now here,” and the NRSV gives, “the day of the Lord is already here.” Either of these captures the intensive force of the perfect tense *enesitēken*. That the perfect tense of ἐνίστημι (*enisīēmi*) means “is present” cannot be doubted seriously in light of its usage elsewhere in the NT (Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 3:22; 7:26; Gal 1:4; Heb 9:9).⁴³

With the nature of the false teaching clearly in mind, as the next step Paul urges, “Do not let anyone deceive you in any way” (2:3a), and then furnishes a reason for knowing that the day of the Lord is not present. The difficulty is Paul’s assumption of an apodosis to accompany the protasis, “unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed” (2:3b). As is customary in language usage, Paul chose not to repeat the verb that constitutes the apodosis of the conditional sentence, thus requiring readers to substitute the parallel antecedent verb to fill in the blank.⁴⁴ That verb in this instance is, of course, the *enesitēken* from verse 2. The sense of 2:3b thus becomes, “The day of the Lord is not present unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed.” Unfortunately, no English versions consulted render the suppressed apodosis correctly in this verse. Most give the supplied verb a future sense, such as, “The day of the Lord will not come,” a change that detracts from the point Paul makes. The issue involved in his correction of the false information to which the readers had been exposed is not the future coming of the day of the Lord; it is rather the current presence or non-presence of that day at the time he writes and they read his words.

Another vital issue to settle in 2:3 relates to the adverb πρῶτον (*prōton*, “first”) in the first half of the protasis. Two meanings are possible. It can mean that the coming of the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness precede the day of the Lord, or it can mean that the coming of the apostasy precedes the

⁴³F. F. Bruce, “1 & 2 Thessalonians,” in vol. 45 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 1982) 165; D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, in vol. 33 of *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995) 227-28.

⁴⁴Cf. Peter Cotterell & Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989) 24, for this principle as practiced in all languages. For another Pauline example of such an insertion, see Eph 5:21-22.

revelation of the man of lawlessness, both being within the day of the Lord.⁴⁵ Posed in grammatical terms, does the “first” compare the total protasis with the apodosis or does it compare the first half of the protasis with the last half of the protasis?

Typically, pre-wrath rapturists and posttribulational rapturists opt for the former possibility, i.e., that the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness precede the day of the Lord. They base this on the mistranslation of the text in various English versions. Robert Gundry illustrates this mistake and has entitled one of his recent books *First the Antichrist: Why Christ Won't Come Before the Antichrist Does*.⁴⁶ He writes, “. . . Paul says not only that ‘the Day of the Lord’ won't arrive unless that evil figure ‘is revealed’ but also that ‘the rebellion’ which he will lead against all divinity except his own (claimed falsely, of course) ‘comes first’ (2 Thess. 2:1-4).”⁴⁷ Erickson joins Gundry in using this support for his posttribulational stance when he writes, “Paul also stated about A.D. 50 that the day of the Lord could not come (II Thess. 2:2) until the Antichrist and a major apostasy had come (v. 3).”⁴⁸ That interpretation is oblivious to the lexical and syntactical requirements of the Greek text, however, and a brief survey of grammatically parallel passages shows its inadequacy also.

A close parallel to the set of criteria in 2 Thess 2:3b occurs in John 7:51 where there occur (1) present action in the apodosis, (2) a compound protasis introduced by ἕάν μῆ (*ean mē*, “unless”) with the action of both aorist subjunctive verbs included in the action of the apodosis, and (3) *prōton* in the former member of the compound protasis. John 7:51 reads thus: “Our law does not judge the man unless it hears from him first and knows what he is doing, does it?” The judicial process (present indicative of κρίνει, *krinei*, “it judges”) is not carried out without two parts, hearing from the defendant first and gaining a knowledge of what he is doing. Clearly in this instance, hearing from the defendant does not precede the judicial process; it is part of it. But it does precede a knowledge of what the man does. Here the *prōton* indicates that the first half of the compound protasis is prior to the last half.

Another verse relevant to this set of criteria is Mark 3:27: “No one can enter the house of the strong man to plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man and then he will plunder his house.” Here the apodosis is present indicative followed by *ean mē* and a compound apodosis with verbs in the aorist subjunctive and future indicative—the future indicative being somewhat interchangeable with the aorist subjunctive. Because of the τότε (*tote*, “then”) in the last half of the protasis, the *prōton* clearly evidences the occurrence of the first half of the protasis

⁴⁵Martin (*1, 2 Thessalonians* 232) notes, “Its [i.e., the adverb *prōton*] placement in the sentence slightly favors the understanding that the apostasy comes ‘first’ and then the lawless one is revealed.” For unstated reasons, he chooses the other option, however.

⁴⁶(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997). See also Erickson, *Basic Guide to Eschatology* 175.

⁴⁷Gundry, *First the Antichrist* 20.

⁴⁸Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* 175.

before the last half, i.e., the binding of the strong man prior to the plundering of his house. It does not indicate that the whole protasis is prior to the apodosis, i.e., the binding of the strong man and the plundering of his house prior to entering the house. In other words, it indicates that the binding precedes the plundering, but not the entering, and the entering includes both the binding and the plundering.

Application of these data to 2 Thess 2:3 results in the following: “The day of the Lord is not present unless first in sequence within that day the apostasy comes, and following the apostasy’s beginning, the revealing of the man of lawlessness occurs.” Rather than the two events preceding the day of the Lord as has so often been suggested, these are happenings that comprise conspicuous stages within that day after it has begun. By observing the non-occurrence of these, the Thessalonian readers could rest assured that the day whose leading events will be so characterized was not yet present.

Assigning these criteria to 2 Thess 2:3 frees Paul from the accusation of contradicting himself. In 1 Thess 5:2 he wrote that the day of the Lord will come as a thief. If that day has precursors as 2 Thess 2:3 is often alleged to teach, it could hardly come as a thief. Thieves come without advance notice or precursors. Neither does the day of the Lord have any prior signals before it arrives.⁴⁹ Paul does not contradict that meaning in 2 Thess 2:3. He still clings to the imminence of the wrathful phase of the day of the Lord.

Alienation Coinciding with Glorification (2 Thess 1:9-10)

In 2 Thess 1:3-5a Paul offers thanks to God for the perseverance of his Thessalonian readers as they face severe persecution because of their stand for Christ. He considers this a sign of their healthy spiritual development. Then in vv. 5b-10 he turns to discuss the righteous judgment of God that will include a payback to their persecutors and a reward for faithful believers. That judgment by God will impose “tribulation on those who afflict you” (1:6)—an extended period—and “rest to you who are afflicted” (1:7a)—a momentary happening. Both the tribulation’s beginning and the rest will come in conjunction with “the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven” (1:7b).

Further description of the judgment includes the payment of the penalty of eternal separation from the presence of God (1:9) “when He comes to be glorified in [the midst of] His saints and to be marveled at among all those who believe” (1:10a). The penalty’s beginning and the reward phases of His return are simultaneous as indicated by the ὅταν (*hotan*, “when”) that begins 1:10.⁵⁰ The last four

⁴⁹To this effect J. Christiaan Beker writes, “Paul emphasizes the unexpected, the suddenness and surprising character of the final theophany (1 Thess 5:2-10)” (*Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel* 48).

⁵⁰The only way that both the beginning of the penalty phase and the reward phase of the revelation can be imminent and still parts of the day of the Lord is for them to be simultaneous. If the reward phase were to come later in the day of the Lord, prophesied events would precede it, thereby removing it from the category of imminency. If it were to precede the day of the Lord, the beginning of the day of the Lord would no longer be imminent as Paul so specifically writes that it will be in 1 Thess 5:2.

words of v. 10 fix both as occurring “in that day” (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ, *en tē hēmerā ekeinē*). “That day” is a frequent technical designation for the day of the Lord in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Isa 2:11, 17, 20; 4:2; Joel 3:18; Mark 13:32; 14:25; Luke 21:34; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8). Paul has referred to the penalty phase of the day of the Lord in 1 Thess 5:2-3, 9 as a period of wrath, a period whose beginning will come as a thief in the night. He will refer to the day of the Lord again in 2 Thess 2:2. Thus when he uses “that day” in the eschatological framework of 2 Thess 1:10, the context indicates conclusively that the expression refers to the day of the Lord. “That day” is a period that will be climaxed with the personal return of Christ to judge the offenders (2 Thess 1:7-8). But 2 Thess 1:10 also connects Christ's return to be glorified among believers with “that day,” i.e., the day of the Lord. This is an event that will occur at the very beginning of the day of wrath. It is the same event referred to in 1 Thess 4:17 as a “catching away,” in 2 Thess 1:7a as “rest,” and in 2 Thess 2:1 as “our gathering together to Him.” Here is a specific tie-in between the rapture of the church and the beginning of the day of the Lord. They are simultaneous. Both are imminent. This is the moment of reward for those who have faithfully persevered in all their trials and persecutions (cf. 2 Thess 1:4).

The connection between the rapture and the day of the Lord in 2 Thess 1:9-10 reinforces the conclusion that the same connection exists between 1 Thess 4:13-18 and 5:1-11. The rapture and the beginning of that day will be simultaneous, and both could come at any moment.

Summary of Paul's Teaching on Imminence

See Chart 4 on page 214 for a summary of Paul's emphasis on imminence in 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

The Pervasiveness of Imminence Teaching

The ancient fathers were right. The teaching of imminence pervades the NT in connection both with Christ's return for the church and with His return to initiate the wrathful phase of the day of the Lord. Jesus Himself initiated the NT teaching on imminence with such parabolic figures as the coming of a thief and the master at the door. Various NT writers picked up on these figures and used them to teach imminence also. Paul was one of them, particularly in his Thessalonian epistles where he continued Jesus' emphasis on the imminence of His return to deliver the saints and to begin the earthly phase of God's wrath against a disobedient world.

If both the rapture of the church and the beginning of the day of the Lord are occurrences that could come at any moment, the timing of the rapture is not open for debate. The only way that both events could be imminent is for them to be simultaneous. If one preceded the other even by a brief moment, the other would not be imminent because of the sign provided by the earlier happening. This fact constitutes strong biblical support for the pretribulational rapture.

Imminence serves as an encouragement for the saints to persevere in godly living and as a warning to others to repent before becoming victims of the wrath of a righteous God. May we shape our lives and our teaching to perpetuate these strong biblical emphases.

**Chart 4—Paul’s Teaching of Imminence
in 1 and 2 Thessalonians**

	Coming Wrath	Coming Deliverance
1 Thess 1:10	“the coming wrath” (a hint of imminence in the present participle <i>erchomenēs</i>)	“to await His Son from heaven, . . . Jesus who delivers us” (a hint of imminence in the concept of awaiting)
1 Thess 2:16	“the wrath has come upon them fully” (wrath is imminent, at the threshold)	
1 Thess 4:13–5:11	“the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night” (5:2; imminence of the wrath spoken of in 5:9)	“We who live and remain will be caught up with them in the clouds for a meeting with the Lord in the air” (4:17; expectation associated with imminence of deliverance from imminent wrath, promised in 5:9)
2 Thess 1:6-10	“tribulation” (1:6), “vengeance” (1:8), “eternal destruction” (1:9; imminence of “that day” in 1:10)	“rest” (1:7), “when He comes to be glorified at among His saints and marveled at among those who believe . . . in that day” (1:10; imminence of “that day” in 1 Thess 5:2)
2 Thess 2:1-3		“the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (2:1; “the day of the Lord is not present” unless the apostasy occurs as a part of that day, followed by the revelation of the man of lawlessness, 2:3)